

Did You Know?

By Clem Dougherty

...that the Russians played a crucial role in the Spanish decision to colonize California? Yes, it's true. The year was 1769. At that time California was a frontier province of the Spanish Empire. New Spain was centered in Mexico City and governed from there by the Spanish Viceroy, the representative of the Spanish King, then Carlos III. For the 250 year period prior to 1769, the Spanish had ignored California. But in 1769 Spain suddenly focused its full attention on California. Why? The Spanish Ambassador in St. Petersburg informed Madrid that the Russians in Alaska were seriously interested in coming to California. Why? The Russians were starving in Alaska and needed some place to grow fruit, vegetables, meat, and grain for the colony in Alaska. As a result the Russians were looking at California. The Spanish viewed Russian expansion as a real threat to their silver mines in northern Mexico and decided to colonize California. The means by which the Spanish chose to colonize California was the mission system. Some centuries earlier the Popes had given to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, and their successors, the "Patronato" which included the right to send missionaries into territories of the New World. So in 1769 the Spanish chose Father Junipero Serra and the Franciscan Order (then staffing the missions in Baja) to establish the missions in California. Serra's purpose, though, was different from the Spanish military purpose. His purpose was religious -- to found the kingdom of God here on earth based upon Christian principles, and to prepare for the second coming of Christ at the end of time. Father Serra's religious purpose would conflict with the military purpose, and there would be constant warfare between Serra and the Spanish governors during Serra's lifetime in California.

To reach California the Spanish could not come from central Mexico because of warlike Indian tribes along the Colorado River and in northern Mexico. Instead, to enter California the Spanish had to come up from Baja. Thus, in Baja the Spanish organized what they called the "Sacred Expedition," or, in Spanish, "La Sagrada Expedición." The Sacred Expedition consisted of five elements: three ships and two land divisions. The three ships were the San Carlos, the San Antonio, and the San Jose. The Sacred Expedition as a whole was under the command of Don Gaspar de Portola, the military governor of Baja and a native of Catalonia in Spain. Father Junipero Serra took charge of the religious part of the Sacred Expedition. Serra shared Portola's Catalan heritage. The purpose of the expedition was to found a presidio and mission at San Diego, at Monterey and, midway between those locations, at San Buenaventura. In addition, Portola's orders were to place the capital at Monterey.

As a Catalan, Portola was determined to give Catalonia a place in history by recruiting other Catalonians and Majorcans for the expedition in addition to Serra. Thus, the Sacred Expedition took on a Catalan character.

Sailing north from Mexico up to California was not easy in those days. The ocean currents adjacent to the Mexican/California coast flowed from north to south, that is, from California down to Mexico. Thus, sailing up from Mexico to California against the contrary currents often took three to four months. Scurvy was a constant and very deadly problem. The San Carlos departed first. By the time it arrived approximately four months later in San Diego, two sailors had died from scurvy; the majority of the sailors and half of the soldiers were sick from the same disease; and only four seamen were

able to work on the ship. The San Antonio sailed one month after the San Carlos, but due to favorable winds, arrived in San Diego first on April 11, 1769. The San Antonio also had two deaths due to scurvy, and one-half of the crew was incapacitated by the same disease. The third ship, the San Jose, left Baja, was lost at sea, and was never heard from again. Of about 300 men on board the three ships, not more than 150 survived to reach San Diego.

The first land division departed from Velicata in Baja for San Diego on March 24, 1769. Captain Fernando Rivera y Moncada led this land division with 27 soldados de cuera, or leather jacket soldiers, who were among the best light cavalry in the world. This division drove a large herd of cattle, horses, and mules and arrived in San Diego on May 14, 1769, only to learn of the terrible death rate suffered on the San Antonio and the San Carlos.

The second land division included Portola and Serra and followed the trail left by Rivera. Serra had an ulcerated leg due to a deadly mosquito bite he had incurred years earlier and which had never healed properly. Serra's leg threatened to disable him completely, and Portola urged him to turn back. Serra refused, and with the help of a muleteer applying a successful homemade remedy, Serra made the rest of the journey. The second land division arrived in San Diego on July 1, 1769. Thus, by July of 1769 the Scared Expedition had arrived in San Diego and now stood ready to make the journey north to Monterey.

(Sources: Rawls and Bean: California, An Interpretive History, 9ed., pp.36-39;Carner- Ribalta: Gaspar De Portola, Explorer of California, pp135-136;Kent Lightfoot: Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants, pp.135-136, Kyle, Douglas E., Ed., Historic Spots In California, 4th Edition, pp.315-316.)